

Telephone interview with COL Michael Holladay, USMC (Ret.), and Raymond Felle, hospital corpsman, both formerly of Co. K, 3rd Battalion, 9th Marines. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 29 December 2004.

Felle: Your job [referring to COL Holladay] was to find the enemy and take him out. My job was to keep your Marines in fit shape to do that.

Very early on the morning of the 14th, CAPT Alexander Ward, our commanding officer, had cut his finger. We hadn't gotten to Valentine's Ridge yet. It was probably about 2 o'clock in the afternoon. He was talking with somebody else. We had passed him by as we lined up our platoons to go up on Valentine's Ridge. I told him that he needed to take care of the cut. He said, "I don't need to."

I said, "You've got to put a Band-Aid on it or you're going to get jungle rot and it will get infected. So, he let me put a Band-Aid on his finger and that was the last time I ever saw CAPT Ward.

Someone then said they had seen some NVA moving up out of a valley up onto the hill that would later be called Valentine's Ridge. It was about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. We were heading down into a valley and across a creek. We then started up the side of Valentine's Ridge. There was a well-made trail. That's one thing that's very vivid in my mind. Because the mountain was so steep, the trail zigzagged its way up the side of the mountain. We had gotten part way up the trail when COL Holladay made the decision to get off the trail, cross a little gully, and head up the side.

About 15 of us got off the trail and that's when they [NVA] opened up with a .50 caliber machine gun. We returned fire. For me, it was my first contact and I was pretty scared. We were trying to hustle up the side of this hill that was so steep, rocks were rolling back down again. We had gotten pretty close to the top of the ridge when an NVA fired an RPG which hit a rock. There was a loud explosion and the Marine in front of me got part of his butt blown off. Someone began yelling "Corpsman up!" I wasn't very far from him.

There was all this confusion. Mortar rounds and RPGs and machine gun fire. I'll leave the part about taking out the RPG nest to COL Holladay. My part was taking care of the wounded. At that point, several of us were wounded, including myself. I didn't even know about it because I was so scared and the adrenalin was running.

One of the guys had his M16 jam just when he had one of the NVA in sight. I also remember that someone threw a grenade toward the RPG nest but it hit a tree and started rolling back towards us. Someone then said, "Get down! It's rolling back toward us!" We hid behind a log so we were pretty well protected from the blast.

A gunny sergeant with us had a shotgun. I was attempting to control the bleeding on this guy and he was starting to feel pain. I gave him a shot of morphine. I remember losing contact with the command group until we were just our own little group of people and didn't know where everybody else was.

COL Holladay contacted Ca Lu and Ca Lu called in the jets. The jets told us to mark our position with green smoke and then they started dropping high explosives around us. We were in triple canopy jungle. You couldn't really see the sky. Then the bombs started dropping. You didn't know how far away they were but they were close enough to lift you off the ground. The shards of the bombs then tore the limbs off the tops of the trees and they dropped down on top of us. And all this was going on while there was machine gun fire, mortars dropping, and we didn't know where the rest of the company was.

COL Holladay brought us together as a group and got us over the top of the hill, which was on the west side of Valentine's Ridge about 5 or 6 o'clock when darkness was starting to fall. As we started down into a gully, I knew we were going to get ambushed. We had the wounded with us. But we didn't get ambushed.

We got down to a culvert on Route 9, just a little ways away from the Quang Tri River. When we crawled out of the culvert and got up on Route 9, it was already dark. You could look back up on the ridge and see the red and green tracers going back and forth up there.

We stayed on Route 9 and communicated with the Ca Lu. They told us to start moving down Route 9. It was about 2 o'clock on the morning of the 15th. That whole time they had been shooting out illumination rounds until we could see the surrounding area.

Holladay: Doc has described it very well. From a platoon commander's perspective, we had been taking mortar rounds and some other activity from that ridge line, which was just due west of us toward Khe Sanh. It was the first high ridge line due west of Ca Lu. As Tet kicked off, we were getting more and more incoming into the Ca Lu perimeter. So our company was ordered out on a daytime operation.

About every third day, the company would go out on some kind of activity. We had gone out on the night of the 13th about 10 o'clock in the evening. We went out and established a position where the S-2 scout, who was assigned to us, and I called in pretargeted positions--pretargeted artillery all along this ridge line. There was good and bad in that. The good is you're spanking them some. The bad part is that they know you're coming.

We spent that night calling in artillery and some 4 deuce mortars up on the ridge. The next morning about 5 o'clock, the company came through down below us and we fell in at the rear of the company. We then proceeded until about 2 or 2:30. We'd come up on a short ridge line that was just before you got to Valentine's Ridge. The ridge lines were separated by a small stream that ran off of the Quang Tri River back through that culvert Doc mentioned.

When we looked down through the valley we saw square holes in the canopy. We figured that's where the incoming on that ridge line originated.

The Company Commander then made a command decision to proceed with caution as opposed to calling in more artillery. About that time of year we were still having short days and it was going to get dark around 1700. At that time, we didn't have night vision goggles like they have today. On a dark night over there, when there wasn't a moon, the NVA owned the night; we didn't. So we wanted either to put artillery on them or go after them, which was what the captain's decision was. The problem was that we had to go down the western side of that ridge line and then up the other side. And by the time we got up there, it was going to be getting on towards dark.

But he gave the order to move out and we moved out in a company wedge--1st Platoon in the center, 3rd Platoon to the left, 2nd Platoon to the right. I was 1st Platoon. The Company Commander was moving with us. We moved down, and when we came out of the stream bed, we noticed that all the underbrush was pretty well cut back and there were sandal tracks--Ho Chi Minh tracks--coming down off the ridge line, off this little trail that Doc was talking about. We found C-ration cans tied to strings so that they could dip them down into the stream for water. That's the first time I'd seen that. Do you remember that, Doc?

Felle: Yes. They were on bamboo sticks.

Holladay: We knew the NVA were there. You could smell them, too. As we moved around out of the stream and around towards the south, coming up on the ridge line, we fell into a natural draw. This was the draw that Doc referred to and it would have made the going pretty easy. But with all I had already seen, and my Platoon Sergeant at the time, CPL Williams, and I looked at each other and said, "We aren't doing that."

So we peeled off to the right and started going, as Doc said, around the mountain, but it was so steep we couldn't hold our footing. We took an e-tool and drove it into the side so that the machine gunner, who was the littlest guy in our outfit, could keep his footing. Everybody was hooked up and we had to push him up. Then we heard the .50 caliber kick off going right down the draw we had just left. Fortunately, the last part of my platoon had just come out of the draw. Unbeknownst to me, as we started making our way off to the right, the Company Commander was moving with the 3rd squad. He had taken the 3rd squad and peeled off to the left over by the 3rd Platoon. He ended up staying down in the draw and just above the stream bed. Unfortunately, they ended up in the middle of a pre-established target zone. The mortars that kicked off--82mm--were being fired with zero setting because the things were going straight up and coming straight down.

We made our way around to the right while all this was going on. We tried to get to the top of the ridge because we wanted to get to the high ground, not knowing what there was up there. As we got closer to the top, there was a huge boulder off to our right. As we got closer to it, we could hear the firing was going on down in the valley. And all of this was happening in a matter of 5 minutes.

All of a sudden the rock exploded and we knew it had been hit by something. The thing just shattered to pieces. And that's when it blew one of the cheeks off the ass of a Marine. It was just like someone had taken a meat cleaver and sliced it right off.

By that time, we were pretty much on our bellies and hands and knees moving up on this thing. Someone had seen one of the NVA on top of the ridge line firing down. We then figured that they probably had some RPGs up there. Later we figured out that that's exactly what part of that position was. The south end of the position was a trench line with an RPG position where they could fire down on Route 9 should anyone try to bring vehicles by there on the way to Khe Sanh.

So it was a blocking position with some mortar pits established up there.

By that time, CPL Williams figured out that we didn't have the third squad with us and went back to find it. He went back to find it because the 3rd squad had our other machine gun. We needed it to fire down the ridge line. With the M16s jamming on about every third round, and not having any mortars with us, and only one M60, we just couldn't carry enough ammo. I was very concerned about not having enough machine gun ammo.

Williams had barely gotten back to us before the fast movers [aircraft] were coming in and dropping HE and a couple canisters of napalm. I remember the heat coming off one of the canisters. I'd never been that close to napalm before.

We knew we had to take out the position on the top of the hill. There were four of us--my radio operator, myself, and two others. Doc was right behind us. We crawled forward with some grenades and reared back and threw them up as high as we could. Finally, we got in close enough to knock them out. We found blood later but no body. Fortunately, the slope of the side of the ridge line was such that when the NVA would try to stand up and try to fire down, they were really firing over our heads.

There was an unfortunate aspect to all of this. Our Company Commander and his command group were caught moving down into the draw with the 3rd Platoon. I tried to establish contact with the Company Commander and talked to him one time. He wanted us to come back down the hill and I said I would not do that. We were staying on top of the ridge and for him to come up behind us. And that's the last time I talked to him. A few minutes later, mortar rounds impacted into their area and he died of wounds later on. The Executive Officer was also killed, as were the artillery forward observer, the company Corpsman, and several others.

Nevertheless, we had knocked out the position on the top of the hill. But now we had this young Marine with the ass wound who was in some dire pain. He couldn't walk. We couldn't lay him on his back. We ended up having to hang him over our backs and pull his arms around the front of us and let his feet dangle to get him off there. We didn't carry stretchers.

It was dark. The machine gun jammed on us and we had run out of ammo. We made the decision to get over the top of the ridge line and try to regroup. I could only talk to the battalion rear back in Ca Lu. We went down the back side of the ridge and to Route 9 where we established a position. We were then told to call in illumination rounds over a prominent terrain feature that everybody recognized. That was what everyone called "The Little Rockpile." It was an anomaly sitting out in the middle of the jungle.

We had a handful who were wounded, and this young man who was really in pain. So we had to get him down there. And as we came on down towards the area where the Little Rockpile was, Marines began emerging out of the shadows so we could now regroup.

The NVA had really ambushed us well. They had split us up pretty bad. It wasn't until 2 days later that this whole episode was over and the 3rd Platoon was able to extract itself.

Herman: The other day, you told me that your outfit was chosen to go back to Valentine's Ridge some time later to recover the Marines who were still up there.

Holladay: The major attack on Khe Sanh had already kicked off. The plan had been set for Operation Pegasus. Our battalion was told to hold fast. So, by now it was about 23 days after the fight on Valentine's Ridge. During that time, our battalion had started raising so much hell because of what was happening on the ridge. The buzzards were really working the ridge line. We had a number of Marines and a Corpsman who were MIA. You never want to be in that position. That's the worst thing that could possibly happen is to have MIAs. Marines do not leave their dead on the battlefield. They bring them out. But at the same time we were told we could not go back out there.

After a lot of raising hell, they finally assented but only after we sent in a recon team to see what was out there and locate the remains. The recon team went out. They located the remains but refused to bring them in. So I volunteered our platoon and we were sent out to find the remains.

We went out with an old half-track kind of thing that would provide us with a way to carry the remains back in. We went down to where the culvert was in broad daylight. Marines went up on the side of the hill. By that time it was well into the first part of March and it was getting hot. As we got up on the side of the ridge line we found all the remains except one that we could identify.

Besides everything else, we were dealing with the constant threat of disease. Every time you got a cut, it got infected out there. There just was no way to stay clean. One of the biggest

jobs that I had, and certainly Doc, too, from a medical standpoint, was to force the Marines to take care of themselves.

We had no body bags. All we had was ponchos. We cut bamboo poles. We wrapped the remains up in the ponchos. It wouldn't take 5 minutes before the body acid would eat right through the ponchos. And we're not talking rubber gloves. We're talking about digging up the remains, etc. We'd put the remains on the ponchos and then they would fall out on the ground. It just took all day long to recover those remains. Let me let Doc pick up at this point.

Felle: After we got off the mountain and were back in Ca Lu on the 15th, we didn't know the condition of the rest of the company. It wasn't until the evening of the 15th that we discovered how many people had been killed or were missing. We wanted to go back out there and get our dead. We didn't want then to be MIA and that's how they were classified. Even if you had seen them get killed, they were still classified as MIA. We were told not to write home to tell any family members that you saw them killed; you couldn't do that.

Then our minds began playing tricks on us. From Ca Lu, we were within view of Valentine's Ridge. At one point, we even thought we had seen an NVA tie one of the bodies up on a tree. But it wasn't so. We knew that the NVA were up there. MAJ Oliver wouldn't allow us to sacrifice any more men to recover the Marines who had been killed.

According to the S-3 reports, on the 5th of March, a team called Del Mar, which was a 20-man recon team, "located all of the previously known USMC KIA bodies (5) and they also found two USMC MIA bodies." At least that gives us a time line on the 5th of March. About 2 days later, we went out there. All I can remember is ponchos coming down off the mountain. At the base of the poncho where your head goes in, that's where stuff would be leaking out as we carried them down off the hill down towards Route 9. I don't remember much else and I just don't know what I did with that information in my head. I do remember other Marines who were carrying them off the hill saying that everyone was puking all over the place, and the smell of death was just everywhere. And once you got that smell of death on you, you just can't get it off.

Holladay: As I recall, where we had decided to make the extract point, was the closest point to Route 9. We had to traverse about 400 meters back and forth. The difficulty was the heat. It was just so damn hot. The canopy was wet and the humidity was a thousand percent. Combine that with the smell of the dead, as Doc talks about, and . . . I can smell it right now. It just never leaves you.

The last order I was given heading out there was, if we were not able to bring in the remains because they had been destroyed in some way or they were booby-trapped, or animals had gotten to them . . . There were so many dead up in those mountains at that point that there was a problem with the plague.

Felle: There were rats everywhere.

Holladay: We were constantly bothered by rats at night and in the bunkers. We'd set out peanut butter in big traps. So we didn't know what condition we were going to find them in.

We found the remains very decomposed. There were some torsos that were together but there were appendages that were separated. Several had the fingers eaten away. But as we were heading out there, my last order was that, if at all possible, we've got to get some kind of jawbone to identify the teeth. As Doc said, the MIA thing was a big deal. You just don't want to

be in an organization that has MIAs. KIAs and WIAs are one thing but if you can't find and identify your missing, you've got a problem.

Felle: You don't want to be left in the field.

Holladay: That's right. And Division is on you all the time. And, of course, we were caught between a rock and a hard place. It took us most of the day to get the remains down to Route 9. We got them in the back of this old vehicle that was as big as your present day Humvee.

Anyway, we got the remains loaded in the back. I had to have a resupply of ponchos brought out to us. We finally got everything we could find. By that time we had gotten orders to bring in every bit of material we could find, whatever it was--boots, belts, helmets, whatever. We took it all back to the LZ.

By that time they had a couple of '46s in. There were some photographers. I remember one guy standing and taking pictures constantly while we were removing the remains and laying them out on the LZ for Doc Behrens to try to make an identification.

Felle: We took all the bodies back to Ca Lu and put them on the landing pad there. When they removed the bodies from the helicopter, they had to saturate the place where they had been lying with kerosene and diesel fuel and light it on fire because the smell was so bad. Jerry Behrens, the Battalion Surgeon, then had to ID the bodies. From the pocket of one of the bodies he examined, he took a journal, that of HM2 Larry Goss, our company corpsman. The last entry was February 12th. He saw to it that Goss's wife got it. I got a copy of the journal from his daughter a few years ago.

Holladay: And that was the end of our aspect of the mission. We were given orders to ensure that we washed as carefully as we could--hands and arms, fingernails. But, I'll tell you, you just didn't get that smell off of you. We only had one set of utilities. The only clothes you had was what you were wearing.

Felle: We are also involved in another recovery of bodies. Team Little Gull was a recon team that was sent out some time in the mid-portion of January. As I understand it, they were a walkout team. It means they walk out of the combat base rather than being taken into an area by helicopter. The problem is that if the NVA were observing the combat base, they could see them walking out and could trace them. Anyway, this recon team was walking out of the Rockpile headed west and then north to the top of Mutter's Ridge. Mutter's Ridge was a group of mountains that run north-south probably 15 to 20 miles. It was NVA territory. They owned Mutter's Ridge and it was a bad place to be.

They went up on Hill 484 and were ambushed by NVA. Two of the recon members escaped but five or six Marines were killed on top of that hill. That was on the 19th of January of '68.

We got orders to go up there and find that recon team and bring them down. It was getting close to evening and they couldn't bring in the rest of the platoon by CH-46 Sea Knight so we spent the evening right there. The next day they brought in the rest of the platoon. That was the 20th. Then we started heading up Mutter's Ridge. One of the members of the other platoon crossed in front of our platoon, and someone in our platoon shot at him, hit his rifle, and knocked it out of his hands. This spooked us even more.

We finally got to the top of the ridge and Zeke [COL Holladay] spotted the body of the first Marine towards the clearing. We proceeded with caution and located more bodies. The first was a guy with blonde hair. He was leaning against a bush and the whole back of his head was gone. All that remained was his face. Another Marine was lying on his back and he had a unit 1. The third was lying on his stomach with the radio missing from his back. He still had the handset in his hand. Zeke was afraid he had been booby-trapped. We tied a rope to one of his arms, moved some distance away, and pulled him over. He wasn't booby-trapped, but I remember the juice just coming out of his eyes which were wide open. There were bugs everywhere. The bodies had only been there a couple of days but that's how the jungle works. Something dies, the jungle eats it up, and it's gone in a few weeks.

Herman: I'm sure neither of you will ever forget any of those memories.

Holladay: They never taught us any of these things. It was just assumed that you'd deal with those things as they happened. These bodies hadn't been there that long so they hadn't yet begun to decompose, but rigor mortis had really set in. It looked as though they were frozen in time. It appeared that one of Marines was about to throw or pop smoke out of his M79 or he had been gassed. I always have believed that it was the former. One of the men had tried to put on his gas mask. I recall seeing the hand on the gas mask and it was frozen in place.

But moving remains in mountainous terrain and getting them to place where you can carry them out or to a place where you can get a helicopter in, is not a little deal. I had been Platoon Commander for a few months and what was really affecting me was constantly trying to keep a group of Marines battle ready in the face of some kind of infection. And this handling of remains just exacerbated the whole issue.

What we were required to do was to collect all of the material plus the remains and take them all the way to the top of the mountain, which was another half a day. We had been inserted just at dark on the night of the 19th. The platoon was split up in this open area, which was not the most exciting place to be. We moved all the next day and set up at night. And we traveled another half a day before we found them. We were bushed. Then we had to get the remains on top of the mountain.

The '46 had to back into the mountain and lower his ramp for us to get the remains into the bird. Then, of course, we were lifted out after that.

This is a whole side of warfare that people just don't give a lot of thought to. But from a commander's point of view, and certainly from a Corpsman's point of view, everything is exacerbated by having to constantly live in the bush all the time. When the body is filthy already, when you're not eating right . . . You'd lost weight anyway. You were living on cigarettes. You were constantly dealing with interruptions. You were in a constant state of adrenalin all the time.

Felle: While we were dealing with all these things that we are talking about, there were leeches to contend with. Now you've got leeches coming toward you and they are going to crawl up your pant leg or up your back. They're going to get to your body somewhere. When they do, they inject heparin into your body so they can suck as much blood as they want and it doesn't coagulate. When they are full enough and they drop off, the place where they'd been sucking the blood continues to bleed. Then eventually the spot becomes infected. Every leech bite in the field became infected and became jungle rot. It's just how you treated it at that point.

Herman: How did you treat it?

Felle: Most people didn't want to go through that. After you've been out on a patrol all day, you're gonna be out on a night watch for 4 hours. You don't have a whole lot of water. You're not gonna try and take care of it. You'd say, "Oh the hell with that. What are they gonna do, medevac me to the rear?"

So, you tried the best to keep people washing and that was the main focus. I think Zeke was saying, "Okay, if you guys can't do anything else, I want you to tell these guys to shave every day." It might seem stupid to shave, but shaving at least gets you to wash your hands. And, at least, you're keeping part of your face washed.

After I got back to the hospital at Quang Tri the last 4 months I was there, I noticed that the very worst cases of leech bite had developed cellulitis. Their legs would swell up. They couldn't walk any more. They had to be medevaced. We'd shave their legs and scrub them with Betadine solution, which would remove all the false scabs from their legs. And then we'd treat the wounds externally with Bacitracin and give them shots of antibiotics.

But in the field, the best thing you could do was to try to prevent the leech bites in the first place. And you did this with "jungle juice." You'd squirt it around the base of your pant legs. Instead of using the wire they gave us to put at the base of the pant leg to tuck it under. Instead of using that, you would tuck your pant leg into your boot. And when the leech would crawl up the boot, they would pass that point, and then you could see it crawling up your leg and knock it off. The majority of them you could prevent by just tucking your pant leg into your boot and tying it up.

Herman: I've seen photos taken in Vietnam with guys having little bottles of bug juice tucked under the band in their helmets.

Holladay: That's right. You used it all the time. It was oily, greasy, but it sure made a difference. Doc is exactly right. I would not permit metal blousing bands because if there was incoming and shrapnel flying around, that blousing band would also become shrapnel in itself and inflict a pretty serious wound down around the leg.

As we learned over the years, the real thing is to keep your hands washed. You can solve so many problems by keeping your hands as clean as you can. The boils were just horrendous over there.

Felle: Everything scabbed over. It got a false scab on it but underneath it was just full of pus. The jungle environment was like being in an incubator all the time. People wouldn't take their boots off. I tried to get men to take their boots off every evening, at least in shifts to see what their feet looked like. Some people just didn't want to take their boots off because it was too painful. And that's because they had immersion foot. When feet are wet all the time, the skin starts wrinkling. And then it starts sloughing off.

Holladay: One of the things that did help was white socks. I think it was because they were cotton as opposed to wool. They either dried faster or something. Several of us just didn't wear socks. Over a period of time your feet could toughen up enough. And, of course, your boots were always wet and caked with red clay. Some of the boots had the canvas sides and a

little porthole in the bottom. When you hit a stream you were instantly soaked. And when the weather was dry, you had a red hue about you all the time, particularly if you were near an airstrip where the dust was blowing. It was just a tough environment to try to stay ahead of.

We also had several rabies cases from the rats. If you were going to lie down on the ground, you lay on your stomach with your arms tucked in tight against your stomach because the rats would try to get up underneath to get warm.

I also want to mention malaria pills. When we were back at Ca Lu, one day was designated as the day when everybody was to take their malaria pills. I recall other Platoon Commanders regularly having people being medevaced because they were getting malaria. It was one of those things where you had to constantly stay on the Marines. That was because the malaria pills would make you nauseous. I'd get sick to my stomach every time I'd take the damn things.

Felle: They were big, orange pills. Just looking at Goss's journal, one of the entries says, "Pill day." So that had to be the day we took our malaria pill.

Herman: Was it chloroquine?

Felle: Yes. When I was up at Khe Sanh, they came out with a different kind of pill. It was a white pill you took every day. We called it the "birth control" pill. We only took them for a while and then never saw them again. I don't know what it was all about.

Holladay: I don't care what you did. You could even take it with food. It still made you sick.

Gentlemen: I want to thank you both for spending time with me this afternoon. I think this was very fruitful having both of you giving me your impressions.